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We know what the pope said, but what did the women say?

Isabella R. Moyer | Oct. 18, 2013 NCR Today

Pope Francis addressed the 150 participants [1] at a women's seminar celebrating the 25th anniversary of *Mulieris Dignitatem*. Discussion boards and commentaries lit up, trying to analyze the deeper meaning of his words. But we are missing the core piece of this news story. What did the women say?

The headline focused on the words of one man while ignoring the reality of 150 experts, mostly women, gathered in Rome to discuss the current and future role of women in church and society. Vatican Radio has a wonderful interview [2] (with audio) with Ana Cristina Villa Betancourt, the head of the Pontifical Council of the Laity's Women's Section. She says the purpose of the seminar was "to become a melting pot of ideas to help us make an analysis of what has happened and what needs to be done: What are the new challenges and the new themes that should be (studied further) in this area? ... People are not here to learn but to share."

She explains the close tie between *Mulieris Dignitatem* and *Christifidelis Laici*. She believes women should be given more spaces "anywhere the leadership of the laity could be encouraged." She continues:

> Because we thought it was very interesting that ... in many cases in the Church, it might be not so much a matter of women not having access to different places, but laity not having access to different places. And that should be more put into practice. Because that was a calling not only from Christifedelis laici but even before: even (from) the Second Vatican Council.

I attended the International Women's Congress sponsored by the Pontifical Council of the Laity commemorating the 20th anniversary of *Mulieris Dignitatem*. Understandably, some participants and presenters were diehard fans and promoters of the document. They spoke glowingly of a feminine genius that put women high up on a pedestal of self-giving love and nurturing. Other presenters questioned the anthropological theology used by Blessed John Paul II, respectfully suggesting that it was but one man's theology and perhaps needed "further study." Amid the theological presentations, we heard from women from India, Korea, Jordan and other countries where women were standing up to church and society and demanding equal rights and an equal voice.

We, too, had an audience with the pope: Benedict XVI gave a short address to us, and it made Vatican news headlines. For me, his words, though pleasant, weren't as powerful as the diversity of women's voices from around the world that echoed in the hall.

I have been hunting and hunting for some news of the actual discussions that took place at this recent women's seminar. After the congress five years ago, some of the presentations were made available online [3] at the website for the Women's Section of the Pontifical Council for the Laity.

I hope that news will be available soon. I want to know what the women said.

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Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/blogs/francis-chronicles/francis-women-called-service-not-servitude
[2] http://www.news.va/en/news/pontifical-council-for-laity-womens-seminar-examin
[3] http://www.laici.va/content/laici/en/sezioni/donna.html